

Disappearance of the Outside

**Edmonton, Alberta,
in the time of COVID-19**

2021

January

Downtown

University of Alberta campus

Lesley Battler

Disappearance of the Outside

Five years ago my partner was transferred from Calgary to Edmonton. I had no interest in moving but this was an unexpected opportunity for him, I owed him big-time and karma's a bitch. Although Edmonton is only three hours north of Calgary the two cities couldn't be more different and I was surprised by how far away I felt from friends, colleagues, associations, how much it felt like some kind of exile.

Then in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic shut the entire world down. This was a time of strangeness, exile and peril on personal, cultural and political levels. Instead of seeing humanity work together in common cause we saw the rise of weaponized individualism, fascist populism, the fall of public institutions, proliferation of conspiracy theories, grifters, the erasure of women from public spaces and the disappearance of the outside, the natural world. All this added to a sense that life is fragile and can be taken away in an instant.

Like everyone else on the planet, no matter how defiant, I was terrified. I'll never forget my first walk around the neighbourhood, seeing playgrounds covered in caution tape, waving at friendly neighbours and their dogs from careful social distances. I worried if it was safe to sit on a park bench that hadn't been covered or removed, and I ended up peeing under a spruce tree because the washroom doors were padlocked. Again, like everyone else I had to come to terms with genuine social isolation along with loss of the natural, biological "real" world. Even Calgary felt like a galaxy away.

Even when the city opened up a little I still felt restricted in how and where I could travel. I don't have a car and depend on public transit, which made me feel extremely uneasy at first. So many places I had come to enjoy in Edmonton were closed or inaccessible without a car. I kept to a few areas of the city where I could go for a walk, find a place to rest and most importantly, a relatively safe bathroom.

I started taking a little camera with me to record these walks to the same places, which really did become haunts. Each time I set out I looked for different things, pretending I was a traveller and had never seen these places before. To me, the walks were a form of bearing witness, of deeply and intimately recording a city that I had never thought about. Maybe it was also way of learning how to see places that aren't celebrated or easy to know on the surface. And even though I was walking outside, it was so uncharacteristically quiet and there were so few people around it didn't feel as if I was outside at all, that I was travelling somewhere deep and internal, a geography of the imagination, a form of psychogeography.

My simplified version of psychogeography is about how I relate to a space, both how I construct it and also how the space constructs me and in this case, how the COVID-19 pandemic has imprinted itself on the city's consciousness as much as on its physical structures. I grew fond, even protective, of this city and I wanted to reveal its hidden side, what lies between the fissures created by all the preconceived ideas surrounding it.

Edmonton feels like a northern city to me, a tang in the air, utilitarian and industrial but also surprisingly beautiful with its ravines, the North Saskatchewan River and the long swooping motion of some of the roads. Everywhere I looked I saw traces of the natural world, even reflected in the windows of downtown office towers. Psychogeography can be an uncovering, a making the invisible visible through connections, patterns and metaphor. How I saw these places in the city, what I chose to record were absolutely infused with the isolation and eeriness of the pandemic.

The photos are arranged in chronological order to show familiar walks and places changing depending on the season, the lighting, human intervention, and the objects I chose to record on a given day or moment. They are an appreciation for the very ordinary objects and experiences – and for the strangeness which allowed me to know them for the first time. The photos themselves have not been filtered or altered in any computer program. My intent is to preserve the spontaneity of the moment, “the eye in the wild.” The collection has been divided into numerous small installments simply because I don’t have enough computer memory to create larger files containing adequate quality jpegs.

I also made an ethical decision to not take photos of the homeless people in the LRT stations, the encampments a block away from Rogers Stadium, or the abandoned office buildings along Jasper Avenue. I am not a photographer or a journalist and I felt I would only be some kind of disaster tourist, gawking at people’s lives without having any kind of influence or platform where I could truly help. I would only be taking from them without giving anything back.

Above and beyond the everyday, the photos also seem to show my concern with how are we experiencing the loss and grief caused by the disappearance of our natural world and biological selves, the marvelous creatures and life forms we should be celebrating and sharing our lives with. I believe we are all feeling deeply unsettled and this feeling is creating havoc on our societies and psyches. The photos express this, but they are also a way to retain a feeling of meaning, creation, and sometimes even joy, through discovering our everyday world, our intimate geographies.

Downtown



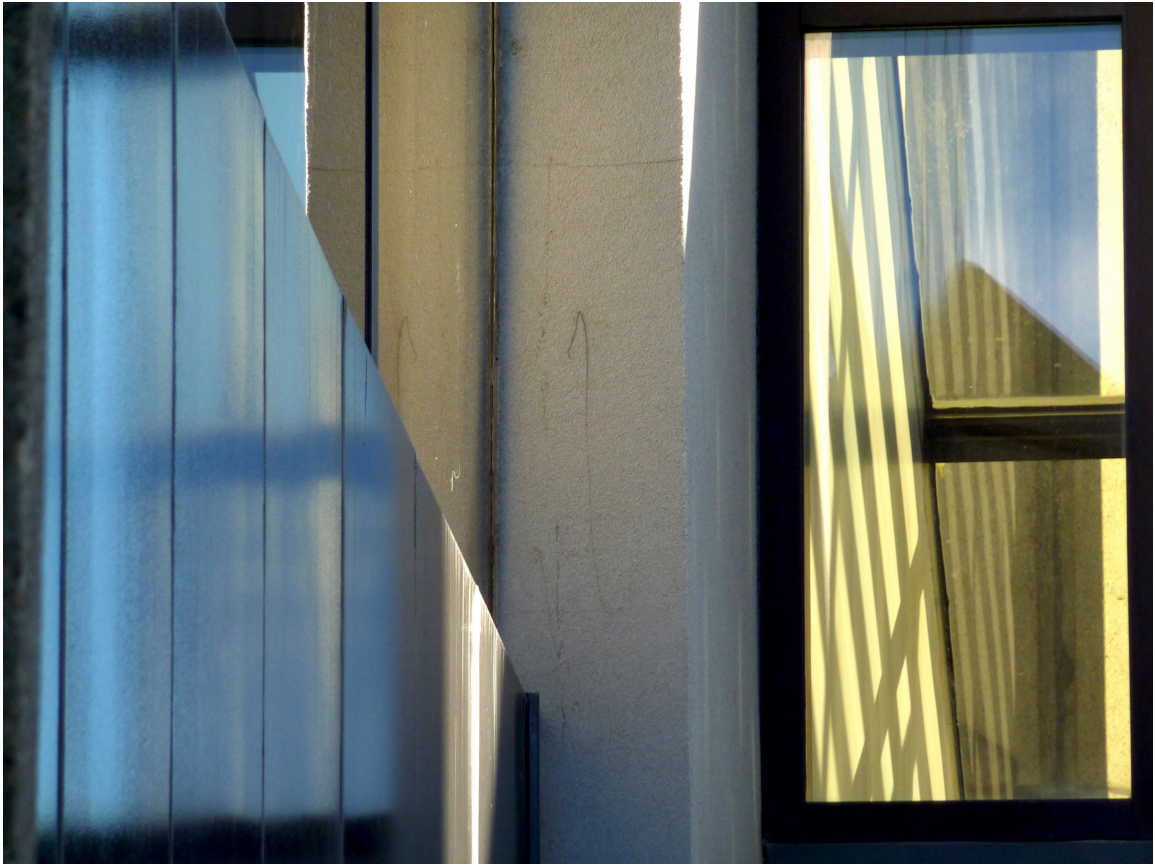
there came out of it the marvel



i haven't been home since



fashioned in obscurity



enigmatic clues



austerity measures



uneasy detente



awkward triangulation



behavioural patterns and compulsions



inevitably, a future takes shape



immersed in the living flow



anatomy of the city



new forms, structures



imaginative flights of thought and language



the city when it thinks no one is looking

University of Alberta campus



hidden deep within



memory can be tricky



what kind of border is this



with no thought for their souls

Next installment:

February 2021

University of Alberta campus